

## MIA - Musings In Appreciation

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By my count, I have published all of 26 articles in *Media International Australia*, starting in Issue 45 in August 1987, with the most recent one in Issue 145 in November 2012 – my own quarter-century, in a century of issues. This is not counting one of the most exciting and memorable occasions in my publishing career – round-figure Issue 50, the only time MIA has been published as a book. ('It was packaged as a book rather than a journal issue (thus confusing librarians and collectors) because it was discovered that subsidies were available for books but not journals', says Helen Wilson, in her warm, detailed and important Commemorative Editorial on the first 30 years of MIA, in Issue 119, May 2006.) This was the third volume of Liz Jacka and Sue Dermody's great work *The Screening of Australia*. It was called *The Imaginary Industry*, and Liz and Sue had invited Tom O'Regan and me to contribute long chapters to their 'update'. For me – pre-PhD, passionately committed to the trials and tribulations of Australian screen history and the present – this was an invitation to the mezzanine level of Australian scholarship.

I was incredibly chuffed, and I wrote an extended appreciation of Kennedy-Miller's great historical miniseries of the 1980s – which I still regard as the high point of Australian screen. It remains one of the pieces I am most proud of. (I republished it in *In the Vernacular: A Generation of Australian Culture and Controversy* in 2008.)

Soon after, working as a policy analyst and advocate with the Communications Law Centre in Sydney, and publishing in MIA on policy and cultural theory, I came under the influence of Henry Mayer. He must have seen something in me, because he started to give me advice when I worried to him about what became *Framing Culture* – the disjuncture between cultural theory and cultural policy, disjunctures between what counted as evidence and scholarly argument in social sciences and humanities. Was cultural scholarship, indeed, 'handmaiden, or no relation' to the policy world (MIA Issue 54, November 1989)? Many of the social science citations in *Framing Culture* were on Henry's orders. Indeed, the book is dedicated to Henry (and Eric Michaels) - 'outstanding practitioners of the arts of cultural politics'.

Since then, I have often trialled arguments that have become bigger projects, and often books, in MIA. It was, and remains, as Helen Wilson (2006: 19) avers, the Australian journal of record in our field.

This is supposed to be a comment piece from a former editor. But I had to begin with why I'm so passionate about MIA, and beholden to the spirit of its founder.

Helen reminds us, when Henry died in May 1991, the journal may well have folded. The indefatigable Meredith Quinn, Publications Manager at the AFTRS, worked with Liz Jacka to collect a bunch of likely suspects – Liz, John Sinclair, Rod Tiffen, Murray Goot, Peter White and me – and successfully propose to the AFTRS six editors to replace the one and only Henry! With the strong support of the AFTRS and especially Meredith, it was an exciting five or so years working with great

colleagues, especially across the social sciences – humanities divide, launching MIA on its career post-Henry. These were what John Sinclair called the 'high rolling' years (13). After this period, my main contributions as an editor to Australian media studies have been realised through six editions of the big textbook *The Media and Communications in Australia*, in collaboration with Graeme Turner and now Sue Turnbull.

I'd like to draw on a few points we have made in introducing the last couple of editions of that textbook in thinking about the trajectory of MIA, how it's looking now, and where it might head.

Media and communications have only been studied formally at a tertiary level in Australia since the 1970s, but it has become the most popular single field of study in the broad humanities for much of the last decade. Looking at the contemporary situation, there has been an overall growth in student numbers from 19 293 in 2002 to 22 321 in 2007 to 29 869 in 2012. While total higher education enrolments rose by 9% over this period, media and communications rose by 55%.

According to the 2013 Good Universities Guide, media and communications is similar in popularity to Accounting or Computing and IT. It also points out that demand for such courses (measured as the cut-off points for entry) can be very high for media and communications at some universities. Graduate satisfaction within media and communications courses is significantly higher than that of most graduates across the country in terms of assessment and workload, and more achieve full-time employment than is the norm across the broader fields of Humanities or Creative Arts.

I am confident that the salience of media and communications studies will continue to increase as we head into a more media-saturated society where identity, social relationships, the future of the democratic process and what we know about the world around us are increasingly dependent on media and communications industries, technologies, content and platforms.

MIA has a critical role to play in backstopping the quality of scholarship which itself undergirds successful undergraduate teaching programs. If you doubt this nexus, consider the range and ferocity of attacks on cultural and media studies in the US and the UK over the past decades compared to the discipline's public profile in Australia.

In the US, the culture wars - with lowlights such as the Sokol affair and the defence of the teaching of the high Western canon against practices which prioritised attention to multiculturalism, postcolonialism, queer theory and feminism - were underpinned by the gulf between what Toby Miller, in *Blow up the Humanities*, calls Humanities One and Humanities Two:

There are two humanities in the United States. One is the humanities of fancy private universities, where the bourgeoisie and its favored subalterns are tutored in finishing school. ... The other is the humanities of everyday state schools, which focus more on job prospects. I am calling this Humanities Two. Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history, and philosophy on one side and communication and media studies on the other. It is a class division in terms of faculty research as well as student

background ...

Toby paints a Goya-esque picture of the humanities at odds with itself as well as being buffeted by external critics.

In the UK, we have also seen withering calumny heaped upon cultural and media studies in the specialist higher education as well as the general press. This also has an undeniable class basis and bias in its dismissive sneering at second, third and fourth ranked institutions and the reviled mickey mouse courses they put on, as well as being a product of rankings fever which forever puts in front of the public ordinal placings of whole universities and individual disciplines in serried ranks.

There have certainly been attempts to pillory cultural and media studies in Australia. But the attacks have been far more muted than those elsewhere. This has got a lot to do with the standing and quality of the scholars and scholarship in the field here.

MIA needs to strive to maintain the highest standards of scholarship. When journal rankings existed for the first iteration of the Excellence in Research for Australia, MIA was advantageously ranked. But there is strong anecdotal evidence from the second iteration that 'local' journals don't count as much as 'international' journals. Not being published by one of the academic publishing-house hegemony also means MIA is not circulated as widely and simply not read as much out there in the world. My articles in *Journal of Cultural Economics*, *The Information Society*, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *TV and New Media*, or *Global Media and Communication*, for example, are cited more than those in MIA.

I am very aware of the potential consequences of 'internationalising' journals previously published independently in Australia. But one intermediate step might be to internationalise the editorial input more systematically, thus creating greater international awareness of the journal and helping to up its citation impact.

MIA needs to keep pushing content boundaries – something which Helen points to as a sometime feature of its history (12). Sue and I say, in our textbook introduction, that 'media and communications studies is expanding its disciplinary reach, taking on the insights offered by law, the arts, business and more' (2014: 12). How much is MIA leading disciplinary innovation?

Now I'm going to conclude with the commentator's Catch-22 (it's so easy from the bleachers): could it be possible to have more Henry-style interaction with industry, policy and mainstream social science? Actually, that's not such a Catch-22 after all. If you followed my drift back then, in *Framing Culture*, and since, you'd know that I think that innovation can come from opening up the discipline's windows to the wider world.